DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 492 CS 501 863

AUTHOR Walwik, Theodore J.
TITLE Communication: An Emerging Discipline in a Changing Environment.
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association of Pennsylvania (38th, Uniontown, Pennsylvania, October 13-15, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Evaluation; *Educational Change; *Educational Trends; Higher Education; Social Change; *Speech Communication; Speech Curriculum; State of the Art Reviews

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways that speech communication can respond to contemporary societal changes. Information activities now account for nearly half the United States' gross national product. At the same time, studies indicate that college enrollments are beginning to decline, a trend that will increase competition between college disciplines for students and space. To respond to these societal changes and to provide necessary instruction in speech communication without being fragmented by competing disciplines, speech communication educators should shift their focus from speech skills to communication skills, stress the common features of various means of communication while still emphasizing specific communication skills, and institute comprehensive communication programs independent of other college disciplines. (RL)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED145492

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Theodore J. Walwik

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

COMMUNICATION: AN EMERGING DISCIPLINE IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT*

Theodore J. Walwik

In considering what I might say to this audience on this occasion, I stopped to take stock of our discipline and the years I have spent in it. It was a revealing mental journey. Twenty-six years ago, in September 1951, a student teacher at Garfield High school in Terre Haute, Indiana, announced that he was forming a debating team. The special inducement was that, if I took part, I would be excused from a particularly boring study hall. Reasoning that debate, whatever that was, must be preferable to the study hall, I volunteered. Thus began my formal association with the field of speech. Today, I stand as President of a professional association, aware of profound changes. If there was ever a group that needed the general semanticists' advice about the usefulness of the technique of dating it is this group. For our field, 1977, is very, very different from our field, 1951.

When I was an undergraduate the typical speech major progressed from public speaking, to advanced public speaking, to persuasive speaking, to argumentative speaking, to a history of public speaking. Progressive curricula threw in a course in group discussion and added work in voice and diction and oral interpretation to insure that the student was "well rounded."

---

*Theodore Walwik is Director of Research and Planning at Slippery Rock State College. This speech was his address as President of the Speech Communication Association of Pennsylvania to the 38th Annual Convention on October 14, 1977.

CS501 863

A swift survey of contemporary curricula reveals the emergence of concerns such as interpersonal communication, non-verbal behavior, organizational communication, psycholinguistics, intercultural studies, mass media, etc., etc. The differences are not superficial. What we have experienced in my professional lifetime is the phenomenon of a discipline coming of age.

However, there are dark clouds on the educational horizon. Studies recently reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education indicate:

> The decreasing number of births since 1957 has . . . begun to affect secondary school enrollments in the state. It is anticipated that the number of pupils in the public secondary schools will decline from 1,116,767 in 1975 to 820,800 in 1985. This represents a drop of more than 26%.

Such enrollment declines in the secondary schools will, of course, be passed on to the colleges. There will be 23.8% fewer 17-year olds (the traditional available pool of college freshmen) in 1990 than there wase in 1975. And, it must be recognized, these declining enrollments with their apparent problems for those in the teaching profession come upon us at a time when the educational community is already suffering from a lack of public confidence. The spectre of our major universities being held hostage as pawns in the current legislative budget/tax fight ought to be enough to convince any educator that we should anticipate difficult times.

The effect of declining enrollments in an era of public scepticism about education, demands for accountability, and uncertain economic health means that we are in for a period of educational Darwinism—survival of the fittest. It seems reasonable to me that, as a professional association, we should take stock of our fitness to survive. How should we, how can we respond to the challenge?

First, we should come to understand just how important to society this phenomenon of communication is. Of course, we have always recognized the personal importance of communication skills to the individual. But, beyond that, communication has become a central matter of social and economic concern.

Recently, the report of Bill Fore to the Board of Managers of the Communication Commission of the National Council of Churches on September 22, 1977 came to my hand. It includes an impressive discussion of the extent to which our society is becoming increasingly devoted to the production and distribution of information. Fore quotes Dr. Marc Porst of the Department of Commerce as saying:

> By 1907, economists and social historians realized that the industrial economy was in full swing. The basic industrial technology had been invented a half century before, and was then diffusing rapidly to all sectors of the economy. By 1907, the society had begun to respond. New industries, new products, new services, new occupations, new life styles—all were propelled by the force of a technological revolution.
>
> By 1977, only seventy years later, we are entering another phase in economic history. We are now just on the edge of becoming an information economy. The information technologies—computers and telecommunications—are the main engines of this transformation. We are now seeing the growth of new information industries, products, services and occupations. Some are presaging new life-styles and work-styles, based on intensive use of information processing and communication techniques.

To this, Mr. Fore added what I believe to be a truly startling statistic. "Today the total information activity in the United States accounts for more than 46% of our GNP." The business of communication has moved to center stage!

We must respond to this communication revolution by breaking out of some of our old, self-imposed limitations and asserting the need for comprehensive communication programs. Too long we have been satisfied to cling to <u>orality</u>

as the distinguishing feature of our field, hopeful that our colleagues in English (and elsewhere) would allow us our peculiar little interest. But, that revolution in the discipline that I spoke of earlier will not allow such posturing any longer. Marshall McLuhan was right when he argued that we have moved from a linear, print oriented world to a global village whose symbol systems are quite different. The result is that the game has changed. We must seize the opportunity or it will be lost to us. The biggest danger is that we will think too small.

In practical terms, I believe we must complete the transition from speech to communication. The difference between these two concepts is, to my mind, quite fundamental. It is more than a mere exercise in labels. Although, we who teach that messages are transmitted but meaning is invested by the receiver in terms of his/her experiential and perceptual base surely understand that what we call ourselves does make a difference. We must be bold enough to lead the way in completing our odyssey from field of speech to the discipline of communication.

Just this week I was having lunch with a colleague from another discipline. In the course of conversation, I mentioned that I was coming to this meeting—the convention of the Speech Communication Association of Pennsylvania. My friend interrupted me with a question, "Why do you still do that?" Somewhat taken aback, mumbled something about the value of professional associations. "No," my friend said, "I mean why do you people use that silly term speech communication?" My only adequate response was to confess our penchant for unsatisfactory compromise.

Often, when I discuss the nature of our discipline with my colleagues in the field I am reminded of nothing quite so much as the old fable of the

blind men who were examining the elephant. Each, necessarily perhaps, had his perception of reality sharply circumscribed. So it is with many of us. We have the tail of public speaking, or the trunk of theatre, or the broad ear of the mass media firmly in hand. And, we fail to grasp the enormity of the elephant itself.

Somewhere in my intellectual odyssey, I demanded--somewhat melodramatically perhaps--"Oh God, is this all there is?" I was rewarded with the suspicion, at least, that somewhere the appendage I grasped so securely was attached to a creature of enormous potential and power.

This does not mean that we should, individually and/or collectively, give up our individual interests and competencies for some amorphous ambiguity. For then we would fall into the same trap as some of our colleagues who study literature but have forgotten to teach people to read and write, etc. The paradox is that as we conceive of our discipline (notice I use that term proudly) more broadly, we must continue to be effectively about the tasks of developing specific communication skills.

However, as we teach our students we need to understand and we need to help them see that the public speaker, and the actor, and the newswriter, and the interpreter, and the filmmaker, and the television director, etc., etc., are fundamentally about the same business--man interacting with man as symbol users.

In reality, what I advocate is not so new. It does not depart in spirit from the great intellectual tradition wherein lies our roots. We have allowed essentially political considerations to cause assignment to different academid departments of such closely related areas as print editorializing and electronic media editorializing, drama and theatre, etc. We must not confuse the

concepts of the academic department—which is often an arbitrary, political entity—and the academic discipline. It has always seemed strange to me that people who teach their students models of communication, including the element of channels, then quietly accept the notion that it is appropriate for them to consider some channels (those which are essentially oral) while leaving some (those which are primarily written) to others. With only slight apologies to our patron Aristotle, I believe there is a discipline of communication and that it should be concerned with "all the available means" of communication.

If we can reacquire this needed sense of the wholeness and integrity of the discipline, then we will be prepared to meet the incredible challenges that face educators in the next decade. Academic planners speak tripplingly of the need to relate to non-traditional populations. We are more experienced than most of our colleagues in adult education, continuing education, and the like. The need for value centered education is another area that will apparently get new attention in the immediate future. Our tradition, dating at least to Quintilian's dictum that the orator is a "good man, skilled in speaking" prepares us for this opportunity. Then, there is the whole new awareness that literacy in this age is not confined to the printed page. It is the scholarship in our discipline that can show the way to better understanding of such things as visual literacy. I could go on, but the point is simply that we have a viable discipline. We have a great deal to offer that can sustain us in our efforts to respond to changing demands.

In this I do not mean to sound chauvinistic, but the hard facts are that the pressures triggered by declining enrollments are going to generate a

scurrying about in the academic community unlike anything we have seen in recent years. If we are to defend our discipline and its integrity, then we must effect much greater closure in our own ranks.

Soon, English departments will discover that one interpretation was really the way they wanted to teach literature all the time, physical education departments will declare that movement classes are their proper concern, the recreation faculty will lay claim to the theatre, free speech courses will again be interesting to the political scientists, and history departments may even take another look at public address. The academic game of divide and conquer will be played shamelessly and ruthlessly.

We will not be able to ward off these attacks one by one. Even if we do so, we run the risk of winning the battle only to ultimately lose the war. We can prevail only by speaking to the relationship of each part to the whole. That means we must develop a stronger sense of that whole, a stronger commitment to our emerging discipline of communication.